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Lowenstein biographer claims activist's 'cult' discredited book

By Charles Wheeler
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Richard Cummings set out five years ago to write a favorable book about a man he greatly admired — liberal activist Allard K. Lowenstein. When the book was published, however, Lowenstein admirers were outraged and worked to discredit it, which, Mr. Cummings says, resulted in a media conspiracy against his work.

Mr. Lowenstein, a one-term congressman known for his leadership in civil rights work and in the Vietnam-era "Dump Johnson" movement, was murdered in 1980 by a former protégé who had become psychotic.

While researching his book, "The Pied Piper — Allard K. Lowenstein and the Liberal Dream," Mr. Cummings became convinced that Mr. Lowenstein once had worked for the Central Intelligence Agency. That became a central theme in his book.

The CIA allegation so outraged Lowenstein admirers that they tried to get Mr. Cummings to change his book. When he refused, they organized an effort to discredit the work.

"I have never seen anything like it in my 25 years in publishing," said Martin Garbus, attorney for Grove Press, publishers of "Pied Piper," which was released in early March. "They contacted the media directly and called reviewers everywhere — Richard had a relentless operation working against him."

It depends on whom you ask whether the campaign was successful. Mr. Cummings claims it effectively demolished his book, but journalists from The Boston Globe, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post and various media outlets say the campaign had no effect on the way they treated the book.

Washington Post writer Myra MacPherson wrote the most scathing of all the articles, but says she entered the project with an open mind. "I went into this with absolutely good faith that this was going to be a fascinating book that was going to tell us something really new," she said. "I have absolutely no connection with Lowenstein and

have no quarrel with the concept [of the book]. Believe me, if there had been something there, we would have been happy to use it."

Mr. Cummings, who led a McGovern delegation to the 1972 Democratic Convention, was not prepared for what he says was an unfair bias toward his book.

"I used to laugh when anyone claimed a liberal bias in the media," he said. "I still don't buy all of Accuracy in Media's ideas, but they have a point."

Before the campaign, a February review in Publishers Weekly called "Pied Piper" a "brilliant, coolly impartial biography" of Mr. Lowenstein.

Later book reviews in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, however, attacked Mr. Cummings' research and ridiculed his claims.

The Washington Post "Style" section article by Myra MacPherson brutalized both Mr. Cummings and his book. "This guy Cummings is really a garbage man ... he has learned that dead men bring no defamation suits," the article quotes Congressman Barney Frank, D-Mass., as saying.

Mr. Lowenstein's family and friends denounced as ludicrous Mr. Cummings' allegation that Mr. Lowenstein had once worked for the CIA. They compiled and circulated a stack of affidavits several inches thick, which portrays the book as "hopelessly inaccurate" and filled with "baseless charges."

Mr. Cummings, shocked at the vehemence of his detractors, maintains that his evidence about the CIA link is convincing and that his portrayal of Mr. Lowenstein is realistic, not at all unflattering.

"If you look at all the evidence, it is very reasonable that Lowenstein did what he did for the CIA," he said. "I stand by my position that the book is highly favorable of him."

Mr. Cummings theorizes that the outrage over Mr. Lowenstein's alleged CIA connection is a red herring. What really has jolted Lowenstein admirers, he said, is that they would have him portrayed not with human frailties and personal ambitions, as "Pied Piper" does, but as a selfless saint. They would like to

propagate the myth of Allard Lowenstein, he said, as an example of what the next generation of liberal activists ought to be.

"The irony is that Franklin Roosevelt invented liberalism as an anti-doctrinaire philosophy. He introduced it in the Depression as a way of experimenting as opposed to the Marxism that a lot of people were clamoring for. After Roosevelt, these people found in his philosophy a rigid orthodoxy. And they have canonized saints that cannot be criticized: They are Eleanor Roosevelt, John and Robert Kennedy and, to a very strong extent among the cognicenti of the group, Allard Lowenstein."

Mr. Cummings said that as a liberal Democrat he too was an admirer of Allard Lowenstein and still thinks he was "an attractive figure."

"The Lowenstein people refuse to believe that I was not hostile to Lowenstein and that I was not out to get him," Mr. Cummings said. "I can't make them understand that I'm not on anybody's side when I start writing."

"I was an organizer for George McGovern, but afterwards I felt that everyone needed to rethink what happened," he said. "This book was supposed to be a liberating experience — I thought that people would want that. But I discovered they don't."

"They're all ready to go march for [Senator] Ted Kennedy and to try to resurrect everything from the past — and I think that's a big mistake," Mr. Cummings said. "You should learn from the past, and you have to face honestly what did go on in the past; and that's what I tried to do with this book."

Mr. Cummings said he had numerous television and radio appearances lined up to promote his book, but that after the critical newspaper articles and after one appearance on a New York City television program, these appearances were canceled.

The one television appearance was not even to promote "Pied Piper,"

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but rather to debate Ronald Tabak, a lawyer who helped compile the affidavits denouncing the book.

"I did very well against Tabak — I was prepared with my facts and I defended the book well," Mr. Cummings said. "But once it was clear that I was no patsy and that they couldn't do to me on television what they had done in print, then the rest of my appearances dried up."

In other words, Mr. Cummings charges that Mr. Lowenstein's friends pressured media outlets to refuse him access to promote his book. He alleges a conspiracy between the media and Mr. Lowenstein's defenders.

For example, Mr. Cummings was scheduled to appear on Cable News Network's "Crossfire" program, but was suddenly canceled.

"Crossfire" co-host Tom Braden said the show's producer decided to replace Mr. Cummings' appearance with another, more important topic. "Crossfire" producer Sol Levine denied being pressured to keep Mr. Cummings off the air.

"The decision was based entirely on whether it was interesting, and

we felt it didn't appeal to a wide enough audience," Mr. Levine said. "We do a lot of issue stuff, but not much person stuff — besides, the material against the book didn't arrive until a few days after we made the decision."

And as for the print journalists who wrote critical reviews and articles, they also denied being influenced by Mr. Lowenstein's friends.

- New York Times reporter Herbert Mitgang said he thought the book "had some very interesting stuff about the '50s and '60s, but that the publishers erred by promoting the Lowenstein-CIA connection too much. That weakened and distorted the good values of the book," he said.

- Wall Street Journal reporter Charles Kaiser said "it is entirely possible that Lowenstein was in the CIA, but this book produces no serious evidence that he was."

- Thomas Oliphant of The Boston Globe interviewed Mr. Cummings but decided not to write anything at all because "the only news broken in the book is the CIA stuff which is based on anonymous sources that cannot be verified."

Despite the denials of his journalistic critics, however, Mr. Cummings still believes the campaign by Mr. Lowenstein's defenders had a profound impact.

"The group around Al Lowenstein is a cult," Mr. Cummings said. "They expected me to write hagiology — propaganda — to get the troops moving, and when I didn't, they just couldn't stand it."